

Gross Folk Remedies Make a Comeback

When you are sick or injured, you visit the doctor. If you have an infection caused by bacteria, your doctor might prescribe antibiotic drugs to destroy the bacteria. But would you be surprised if your doctor treated an infected cut with maggots instead of a pill or cream? Before antibiotics were developed, maggots were used to fight infections. Doctors today have rediscovered the healing powers of these squirming insects.

During the Civil War and World War I, doctors in battlefield hospitals noticed that flies often laid eggs in the rotting wounds of soldiers. These eggs developed into larvae, or maggots. The doctors were surprised to see that patients with maggots in their wounds fared better than those without. Scientists later discovered that maggots release enzymes that break down infection and dead tissue into a liquid, which they eat. They also disinfect wounds and stimulate the growth of healthy tissue.

Today's doctors sometimes try maggot therapy on patients with wounds that won't heal, such as bedsores, burns, or ulcers. With this treatment, maggots are placed directly into the wound and covered with a sheer nylon "cage" to keep them from crawling away. The cage is covered with gauze to keep the area moist and to absorb any liquefied dead flesh. Forty-eight hours later, the gauze and maggots are removed. Most patients say the worst part of the treatment is all that wiggling!

Another way doctors in the past treated sick patients was to bleed them. They believed that removing blood from the body helped rid it of impurities that caused illness. They would either cut patients or place leeches on them. Leeches are slug-like worms that feed on blood. One leech can drink up to five times its weight in blood. When it is full, it falls off and digests its meal.

Today physicians use leeches on patients after surgery to help restore circulation to injured areas. Here's an example. You have cut off the tip of your finger accidentally, and your doctor has reattached it. But the veins taking the blood out of your finger have become blocked, and the blood is backing up. Your doctor places a leech on your injured finger. Leeches have tiny suckers filled with hundreds of sharp teeth. It doesn't hurt when they bite because their saliva contains a natural anesthetic. The leech drinks the blood that has built up, and its saliva releases a chemical that expands the veins in your finger to increase the blood flow. Even after the leech is removed, the area will keep bleeding and circulation will improve for up to 15 hours. Your finger is saved by a leech!



A leech box. Courtesy North Carolina Museum of History.

Leeches and maggots may seem gross, but doctors and their patients are finding that these creepy-crawly cures work better than some modern medicine. If only the thought of them didn't make your skin, well, crawl!